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# HAMLET

FROM AN  
ACTOR'S PROMPT BOOK

THE SUBSTANCE OF A LECTURE  
DELIVERED BY  
HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE  
TO THE WOLVERHAMPTON LITERARY SOCIETY,  
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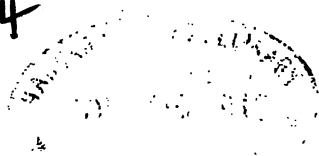


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## HAMLET—FROM AN ACTOR'S PROMPT BOOK.<sup>1</sup>

**I**T seems somewhat bold to attempt to say anything fresh about Hamlet—a subject upon which more wise and more foolish things have been spoken than upon any theme within the scope of English literature. Indeed, it is only by ignoring the vast voluminousness of learned speculation and ingenious comment that I dare hope to put forward that which alone can excuse my temerity—an original point of view. My point of view is that of the actor, and in this declaration I trust I shall not be held guilty of a too fantastic presumption, for were not Shakespeare and Hamlet both actors? I purpose then to approach this most debated of Shake-

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from the London "Fortnightly Review."

Shakespeare's masterpieces through the despised medium of practical experience — I propose, in fact, to attempt to remove the seeming inconsistencies of Hamlet's character with the assistance of an actor's prompt copy. Hamlet is not only literature — it is drama. Hamlet himself is human or he is nothing. It is in the living humanity which animates his whole being that the unequalled attractiveness of this great creation lies. It is because Hamlet is eternally human that the play retains its lasting hold on our sympathies. We are all potential Hamlets. And who more than the actor in the white heat of passion, can explore the giddy heights and latent tracts of Shakespeare's masterpiece? He has the privilege — a privilege which alone would make his life an enviable one — of speaking those noble words, of being for the time translated into the higher region of the great poet's greatest imaginings; of soaring on the wings of passion into the rapt heaven of poetic fantasy; of experiencing personally, in the portrayal of Hamlet, his youthful aspirations, his scorns of the insolence of office, and, perchance, his love for the fair Ophelia.

Like all great works, Hamlet is distinguished by simplicity; he who will approach this sub-

ject with the mind of a child will see clearly—it is only when we look at Hamlet as through the blurred microscope of super-subtlety that it becomes a nebular hypothesis. It is the first duty of the actor, in his interpretation of the tragedy, to bring home the poet's meaning. Of course, each is bounded by his own personality, by the limitation of his own mental horizon. The question as to whether Hamlet was mad or feigning madness, has vexed the minds and spoilt the tempers of countless writers. They have not the suppleness of mind to understand that a man may have many facets—that he may be everything by turns, and everything sincerely,—“A pipe for fortune's finger to sound what stop she pleases.” Here is a young prince of lofty ideals, whose natural refinement of mind has been cultivated at the University of Wittenberg. His sensitive nature shrinks from the contemplation of the boorish court—where he is as much out of place as a jewelled ring in a hog's snout. He returns to Denmark to find a riotous rabble merry-making over the nuptials of his own mother with his father's brother. He sees this hiccupping monarch sitting on his honoured father's throne, and reeling towards his mother's

bed. What wonder that the world seems to him "an unweeded garden that grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature"? Hamlet sickens at the sight—the flood of grief at the loss of his beloved father engulfs, for the moment, his tender passion for the fair Ophelia—and he gives vent to his feelings in an outburst on the frailty of woman.

Hamlet learns from Horatio and his companions of the apparition of his father's spirit. His prophetic soul already presages foul play, and through the darkness of his suspicions now rises the blood-red sun of revenge. Up to this point Hamlet has been a perfectly sane and rational young man. In the meeting with the Ghost, again, there is nothing abnormal in his attitude—he is overcome with awe on beholding his father's spirit in arms, and is prepared to follow him regardless of perils. In the second Ghost scene Hamlet is overwhelmed with grief and indignation on learning of the infamy by which his father met his death. To the actor this is a scene of intense and prolonged excitement, more exhausting, because pent up, than perhaps any passage in the whole play. I have sometimes asked myself, with that second consciousness of the actor, whether

thus to waste one's vital force could have any compensating effect upon the audience, for Hamlet's eyes are fixed on the Ghost, his face is averted from the public, and probably the actor's excitement is lost upon them. But, nevertheless, I conclude that it is necessary for the actor to undergo this strain of self-excitation in order to reach that condition of hysteria which overcomes Hamlet after the Ghost's departure. Here again Hamlet, it seems to me, behaves just as any highly-wrought young man would behave on hearing of the terrible fate which had befallen a beloved father. He is all on fire to sweep to his revenge with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love. But the fire is too fierce — it perforce burns itself out. And here the actor should make clear to the audience that physical exhaustion prevents Hamlet from carrying out the impulse of his mind — the weakened physical machine is, as it were, unequal to respond to the promptings of the mind. Hamlet cries:

Oh, all ye hosts of heaven! Oh Earth, what else?  
And shall I couple hell? Oh, fie. Hold, hold, my  
heart;

And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,  
But bear me stiffly up.

And turning towards the castle where his uncle is still carousing, he continues:—

Oh villain, villain, smiling damned villain.

His passion has reached its climax. He has drawn his sword, it falls back into its scabbard; physical action, the immediate brutal revenge, is abandoned, and Hamlet cries:—

My tables — my tables — meet it is I set it down.

He turns from the sword to the pen, for his is essentially the literary mind. His strength is spent, subtlety takes the place of action, — the mind is stronger than the body. Here the same symptom is shown as in persons who become lightheaded from physical exhaustion. Hamlet can always, such is the agility of his mind, travesty his own emotions, and in this spirit he jots down on his tablets:—

That one may smile and smile and be a villain—at  
*least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.*

This same hysteria continues through the following scene when Hamlet addresses the Ghost:—

Well said, old mole, can'st work in the earth so fast?

The first indication of an apparent aberration of the mind occurs here. Horatio and Marcellus come in search of Hamlet and question him as to his interview with the Ghost. "Oh, wonderful!" says Hamlet:—

*Hor.* Good my lord, tell it.

*Ham.* (*Suspiciously.*) No, you'll reveal it.

*Hor.* Not I, my lord, by heaven.

*Mar.* Nor I, my lord.

*Ham.* How say you then—would heart of man  
once think it? But you'll be secret?

*Hor. and Mar.* Ay, by heaven, my lord.

Hamlet is now evidently on the point of revealing the purport of the Ghost's message. "There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark," he begins; then suddenly, his suspicion of Marcellus asserting itself, he adds, "but he's an arrant knave."

He continues to pour out "wild and whirling words," and makes them swear on his sword that they will never reveal the knowledge of what has passed that night. Upon being assured of their secrecy, he tells them clearly that the Ghost is an "honest" one, and then he opens up to them what is in his mind. He may hereafter, for his own purposes, "put on an



antic disposition,"—that is to say, feign madness in order to be the better able to play the detective, and he enjoins them, by all they hold sacred, not to reveal to any soul that he is thus by diplomacy about to undertake what his physical enterprise shrinks from—the avenging of his father's murder. After reverently apostrophising the dead King's perturbed spirit, he gives his companions the cue to go. Again he feels unequal to the terrible task imposed upon him, and cries:—

The world is out of joint—

Oh, cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right.

With his dead father's voice still ringing in his ears, he goes dazed and exhausted from the scene, contemplating may be, with his mind's eye, the terrible vista of events between him and the goal of destiny.

In the second act we find Hamlet busy with his scheme of feigning madness, for Ophelia tells her father how Lord Hamlet had come to her in a disordered mental and physical state, and how by his demeanour he had affrighted her. The interview probably took place immediately after Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost. Now this brings us to a consideration as to how far

Hamlet's mind was overbalanced by the terrible revelation. Hamlet evidently takes an intellectual and painful delight in exercising his ingenuity and his wit upon the various dupes of his feigned madness. He is, in fact, always an artist—the literary man who makes copy out of his own emotions for his own edification. He, as it were, vivisects his victims, himself the greatest of these; the exercise proves fatal. But in considering the subject of Hamlet's madness or sanity, let it be borne in mind that never in his soliloquies, and never in his communings with Horatio, does he mutter words of madness. This is my case—the antic disposition is only put on with those whom he does not trust, or with those whom he has an interest in hoodwinking. As presented on the stage, I conceive that Hamlet enters slightly before his cue, detects the King and Polonius in their conspiracy, vanishes for a moment behind the curtains, and then enters stark, staring mad to Polonius.

“Do you know me, my lord?” asks Polonius. “Excellent well,” replies Hamlet. “You’re a fishmonger.” In his moods of madness, Hamlet takes pleasure in letting his wit run riot—like a colt in a paddock. On Polonius saying, “My honourable lord, I will most humbly take

my leave," Hamlet replies, "You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life,"—leaping at a bound, such is the versatility of his nature, from the gay to the grave.

In the scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have come to spy upon him, Hamlet receives them with perfect courtesy till his suspicions are aroused. "Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks, but I thank you." And here comes a point at which, as I have suggested before, the meaning of the play may be illumined by stage business. Hamlet, in all the frankness of his nature, gives his hand to Rosencrantz. He finds it moist, with moistness of nervousness and treachery. He looks into Rosencrantz's eyes, and, reading in them a confirmation of the hand's betrayal, he suddenly asks, "Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation?" And he wrings from the two confederates a confession of espionage.

Once satisfied of the correctness of his own suspicions, Hamlet again puts on "the antic disposition." "I have of late," he says, "but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, fore-

gone all custom of exercise ; indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory ; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament—this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire, why it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours." But here he breaks off, the artist becomes absorbed by his own eloquence rather than with its purpose, and with an enthusiasm very wide from all assumption of madness, he continues with those splendid words beginning, "What a piece of work is man !"

In this scene occurs a passage which seems to me the key-stone of Hamlet's character. It is a phrase in which the whole tragedy of his life is bounded as in a nut-shell. Hamlet exclaims, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." In these words we find the clue to the failure of many a potentially great man. The man who most succeeds in life is he who only sees one side. The man whose mental horizon is wide, who is capable of seeing the good and evil on both sides, who wanders from the high-road of a fixed purpose into the by-lanes of philosophical contempla-

tion, will not reach his goal so soon as he who only looks straight ahead, and follows the nose of his purpose unthinkingly. A demonstration of this is contained in the written play of *Hamlet*, which the brief three hours' traffic of the stage prevents being shown in action. I refer to the character of Fortinbras. He sees only one side of things, and knows precisely what he wants. And what is the result? Well, the result is, that when Hamlet is dead, this essentially practical unimaginative young man comes in, and, in the language of our modern slang, "takes the cake."

Perplexed as he is, Hamlet is only too glad to turn to the players, in order for the moment to divert his mind from the contemplation of the duty which the Ghost has imposed upon him. And he asks them to give him a taste of their quality. But the speech of the actor only serves to remind Hamlet of his dormant duty. And here may be mentioned a bit of by-play, which may serve to emphasize what may have been in Shakespeare's mind. In the course of his recital of Hecuba's woes, the player makes use of the exclamation "mobled Queen." Hamlet repeats the words. This may be the first glimmering of Hamlet's scheme to

expose the King through the medium of the play, and with a view to illustrating this, the actor may take out his tablets and reflectively jot down some rough notes. . . . Hamlet is now left alone, and throws himself on a couch. The pent-up stream of hitherto unspoken thoughts is poured forth in torrents of eloquence in the speech, "O what a rogue, and peasant slave am I!" It seems to him monstrous that this player should for the imagined wrongs of Hecuba ("What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?") be able to shed tears and to be distracted, while he himself feels impotent to avenge the bloody death of his own father. Here again the artist is paramount. Instead of rushing to the immediate revenge, he chews the cud of his wrath. To illustrate this state of mind, I have introduced the action of Hamlet making sword-thrusts at the empty throne at the words, "Bloody, bawdy villain! O vengeance . . ." Hamlet, in fact, loves to "act," while he shrinks from doing the deed of violence. The actor should suggest that Hamlet has spent his energy in vain unpackings of his heart, and the drawn sword drops by his side, as he cries in the impotence of his despair, "O, what an ass am I! . . ." He turns to

the thought of testing the King through the play, and thus excuse himself for his inaction. "The spirit that I have seen may be the devil . . .," meaning that the Ghost may be an invention of the devil to entrap him into murder, to avenge what may not have been a murder after all! Hamlet will temporise; "I'll have grounds more relative than this," he cries. "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." Here, again, the actor may illumine the text with illustrative by-play. I have thought it permissible to illustrate the gruesomeness of the situation by making the stage grow gradually dark. The only light comes from a huge fire, and with its aid, Hamlet, kneeling, dashes down on his tablets the lines to be embodied in Gonzago—the speech through which he hopes to "catch the conscience of the King." This is, of course, purely a pictorial effect.

In Act III. we find the King, the Queen, and Polonius scheming to find out from the fair Ophelia whether Hamlet's madness is due to love or some other cause, and the meeting of Hamlet and Ophelia is pre-arranged by them. Ophelia, unwillingly it may be, consents, and sits down with a book in her hand

before the *pris-dieu*. Meanwhile the King and Polonius have concealed themselves, and Hamlet enters with the words, "To be or not to be." From her coign of vantage Ophelia listens to the self-torturings of Hamlet in that great soliloquy wherein he pours out his very heart, and she falls upon her knees praying for her lover. Hamlet's wondrous words may, perhaps, be thought to thus gain an added pathos and significance. Observe here, as in all Hamlet's self-communings throughout the play, that every word uttered by him is sane. In this instance he gives vent to his sighs—as who indeed has not before he reaches the middle age of cynicism, and accepts the world at its own valuation? He longs for that sleep of death which shall be the term of all ills; he rails at the oppressor's wrongs, at the insolence of office, as who among us has not railed? And he laments the spurns that patient merit from the unworthy takes. What wonder that a new pity gilds the love of Ophelia? So great is Hamlet's shrinking from the task imposed, that at this moment he contemplates taking his own life in order to avoid taking that of the King. Revenge itself is now sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. And then, again,



the *leit-motif* rings in our ears—that *motif* which, in considering Hamlet's attitude, I cannot sufficiently insist upon: "There is nothing good nor bad, but thinking makes it so." Tempest-tossed, rudderless, anchorless, he stands before the fair Ophelia, the most pitiable figure the mind of man has ever conjured up. And seeking the sympathy of woman—as who has not in such moments?—he exclaims, "Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered."

We have now come to a scene which has perhaps more than any other, vexed the minds of the analytical, but which by the aid of imaginative stage treatment—and let us always remember that *Hamlet* is a stage play—appears to me to have all the clearness of a blue sky. It should be the endeavour of the actor (with the aid of such imaginative stage business) to make it so clear. I have taken counsel of many, I have waded through innumerable comments, but the following seems to me a simple exposition of a supposed mystery:

*Oph.* Good, my lord, how does your Honour for this many a day?

*Ham.* (*Leaving her presence, and with infinite sadness*). I humbly thank you. Well, well, well.

Ophelia stops him. "My lord, I have remembrances of yours that I have longed long to redeliver; I pray you now receive them." From my prompt book I now take the following:— Hamlet looks tenderly at Ophelia, as though on the point of embracing her. But at this moment his hand falls on the medallion containing his father's portrait, which he wears round his neck. He is reminded of the duty imposed upon him—the echo of his father's voice rings in his ears. His duty towards his father is more sacred even than his love for Ophelia. He remembers that oath "to wipe away all trivial fond records," and he at once assumes madness, as with a dazed look he says, "No, not I—I never gave you aught." Of course, Hamlet would remember his gifts if he were sane; and his reply is an apparent confirmation of the contention that Hamlet is mad. Assuming him to be sane, the explanation is simple enough. I turn to my prompt book and I find this note:— Hamlet looks tenderly at Ophelia, as she in words of gentle chiding thus reproaches him:—

My honoured lord, I know right well you did,  
And with them words of such sweet breath composed

As made the things more rich ; their perfume lost,  
Take these again ; for, to the noble mind,  
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.  
There, my lord.

Hamlet is filled with love and pity for Ophelia. But, to him, all womanhood seems smirched by his mother's act. Has he not exclaimed in the first act, "Frailty, thy name is woman"? Here, it seems to me that the actor may again elucidate what a hasty reading of the text may not make clear. Hamlet, according to my view, takes Ophelia by the hand, and, peering into her face, asks, "Are *you* honest? Are *you* fair?" meaning, is there one woman whom I can trust? "What means your lordship?" Ophelia asks. "That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty. . . ." The line, "This was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof," is clearly pointed at the relations between the King and Queen. "I loved you not," says Hamlet, plucking, as it were, his heart from his sleeve. Ophelia sinks upon the couch. "I was the more deceived." Hamlet goes to her. "Get thee to a nunnery," he says, and with great tenderness. His meaning is, "Go away from the world.

Do not drift about in this relentless sea without the anchor of my love," and he goes on to pour out the confession of his unworthiness, so that she may not grieve for him—"I could accuse me of such things, it were better my mother had not borne me. . . . What should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery."

At this moment Ophelia in her distress has risen. A gust of pity and love surges up in Hamlet's nature. He takes Ophelia in his arms and is about to kiss her, when over her head he sees the forms of Polonius and the King, spying through the arras. "Where is your father?" he asks Ophelia, taking her face between his hands. Ophelia replies, "At home, my lord." Hamlet has trusted Ophelia, and now it seems that she too is false. His soul full of loathing, he flings her from him, crying, "Let the doors be shut up on him that he play the fool nowhere but in his own house. Farewell." Not knowing what is in Hamlet's mind, Ophelia exclaims, "O help him, ye sweet heavens." And then Hamlet pours forth a torrent of words, partly of reproach to Ophelia—words which sear her soul

— partly of *pretended madness*, which words are meant for the ears of Polonius and the King, who are watching. “Go to, I’ll no more on’t; it hath made me mad! I say we will have no more marriages! Those that are married already — all but one” (meaning the King) “shall live. The rest shall keep as they are.” And with one more wild exclamation of “To a nunnery go!” Hamlet rushes from the room.

I have read that Edmund Kean, in this scene, used to come on the stage again, and after looking at Ophelia with tenderness, would smother her hands with passionate kisses, and rush wildly away. But it seemed to me that the tragedy of the situation lay in the fact that Ophelia goes to her death ignorant of Hamlet’s love. And bearing this fact in mind, I have made a variation in the “business,” thus after flinging Ophelia from him and rushing wildly from the room, Hamlet, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, returns. He finds Ophelia kneeling at the couch, sobbing in anguish. Hamlet’s first impulse is to console her. But he dare not show his heart. Unobserved, he steals up to her, tenderly kisses one of the tresses of her hair, silently steals from the room, finding his

way without his eyes, giving, in one deep sigh, all his love to the winds. Ophelia cries: "O, woe is me, to see what I have seen, see what I see." That noble and most sovereign reason is now to her, like sweet bells jangled, out of tune, and harsh. Hamlet's antic disposition has had its desired effect; for the King and Polonius are now convinced of his madness, as is shown in an almost immediately succeeding passage in the play:—

Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.

Hamlet now re-enters with the players. Pointing to the manuscript in his hand, he begins:—

Speak the speech, I pray, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly upon the tongue.

In this scene Hamlet is again the artist. He instructs the players how to hold the mirror up to nature; and certainly a more sane exposition of the whole duty of the actor cannot be imagined, or a more scathing satire on a deviation from that ideal. The interview concluded, Hamlet is once more seen to be exhausted by his own energy. A sigh escapes him—he sinks into a chair, his head tossed,

like a child's, from side to side. But Horatio comes; on him, now that Ophelia is banished, Hamlet leans. In him he recognizes a man who has those qualities in which he himself is tragically deficient. Here is a man "whose blood and judgment are so well commingled that they are not a pipe for Fortune's fingers to sound what stop she please." Horatio is indeed the ideal friend. He is the eternal Boswell who understands another's nature by sympathy. And, what an important part in life is played by men of this restful nature. If not great in themselves, they have that other attribute of genius of being the cause of greatness in others. Horatio is no courtier. He seeks no flatterers—to him Hamlet can pour out his heart, pour out the heart silenced in that atmosphere of duplicity and self-seeking with which it has been surrounded, an atmosphere which to some natures is the very breath of life.

And at this stage of the consideration of Hamlet's character, a comparison and a reflection may be allowed me. Here Hamlet is seen as the very opposite of Iago—of the man, that is to say, who will swim with the stream of a callous utilitarianism rather than struggle

against it. Men of the type of Iago are morally colour-blind. They traffic with intrigue. For them this mode of self-advancement has no ugliness. The study of their lives is social success; popularity is their religion. The voice of the people is louder than the voice of God. With them there is no brain-sickly mis-giving as to the means by which they attain their ends. They go through life, slapping their fellow-men on the back, everywhere making friends, taking care to nowhere make enemies. They are the "jolly good fellows" of a remunerative geniality. The social politician does not waste time in asking himself "Is this right?" He asks, "Is this expedient?" and he "gets there," as the Americans say. The man with scruples cannot compete with him. Such an one, understanding the world, may say to himself, in weariness, "Is not life too short to circumvent intrigue and chicanery? To attain my ends, must I not make terms with the Mammon of unrighteousness?" And he may go so far as to buckle on his armour to join the noble army of "log-rollers," to enlist in the ranks of the great Society of Mutual Protection. It is by such unholy alliances that weak particles make themselves strong. But



the inner man, the other sensitive, perhaps weaker self, will blush before the mirror of his conscience; in scorn he will fling aside the armour and spring once more naked into the arena. Cliques are the outcome of the instinct of self-preservation among the weak. There are two forms of log-rolling. The one form consists in amiably rolling the log to oblige those who are ready in their turn to roll your own. The more truculent log-roller is he who, for value received, will roll logs across the path of those who are not content to howl with the wolves and to bleat with the lambs. It has, alas, become of greater importance to be a good diplomatist than to act well your part.

Let us return to Hamlet, as he reveals himself in the few hours' traffic of the stage. We have left him with Horatio. "Give me that man that is not passion's slave," he cries, "and I will wear him in my heart's core; aye, in my heart of hearts, as I do thee." Then, with a gentle reserve, he adds, "Something too much of this," and returns to his purpose. After stealing up to the arras to see if the King is still hiding, he returns to Horatio, and into the ears of this one friend on whom he can now rely, he pours, in brief but vivid words, his

scheme for catching the King's conscience. With the very comment of his soul, Horatio is to watch the King's reception of "The murder of Gonzago." Here is to be a first night which will give the audience pause, unless the Ghost is a damned one, and Hamlet's imaginations as a consequence, "as foul as Vulcan's stithy." But the festal march heralds the approach of the Court to the play. And here I may mention another instance of stage-management which may make clear a passage that has taxed the ingenuity of commentators.

"I must be idle," Hamlet cries, and he at once puts on his antic disposition. A court jester heads the procession; with him Hamlet converses, and at him he plays the scene which follows. "How fares our cousin Hamlet?" asks the King. "Excellent i' faith, of the Chameleon's dish. I eat the air promise crammed. You cannot feed capons so," pointing to the cocks-combed jester. The King, surprised, says: "I have nothing to do with this answer, Hamlet; these words are not mine." "No, nor mine now," replies Hamlet, again pointing to the jester. To him also Hamlet addresses his comment on Polonius' announcement, that he had once played Ju-

lius Cæsar, and that Brutus had killed him in the Capitol. "It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf." Here is a minor point, but Hamlet's punning reply would be appreciated by this particular listener, and the touch, light though it be, has been found, I believe, to lend relief and realism to the scene. The succeeding coarse remarks which Hamlet addresses to Ophelia (remarks which have also amazed the erudite from their being obviously foreign to the Prince's noble nature), I conceive to have been directed really to the King's ear. They are, indeed, episodic additions to the scheme of feigned madness. As the "Murder of Gonzago" proceeds, Hamlet, lying at Ophelia's feet, watches the King from behind the manuscript which he holds in his hand, gradually crawling snake-like across the stage to the foot of the King's throne. A writer describing Booth's performance at this point, says, "As the mimic murder is accomplished, he springs up with a cry like an avenging spirit. It seems to drive the frightened court before it."

I think that I need not dwell further on the conduct of that great scene of a play within a play, during which Hamlet is irrevocably con-

vinced of his uncle's guilt, a scene which never fails to arouse and arrest the excited attention of an audience, and which leaves Hamlet a prey to the hysteria which results in the speech, "Now let the stricken deer go weep," at the end of which he falls sobbing on Horatio's breast. At the entrance of the spy-courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet reverts to his antic disposition, trifling away with withering satire the time during which he might be accomplishing his undoing of the King. Polonius enters, and again Hamlet dances on the grave of his own emotion in the exercise of his scathing badinage. The strain of the tragedy through which his mind has passed is too great, and in this revulsion he finds that comic relief so dear to the hearts of audiences at a play. Dismissing the false friends, Hamlet is left alone, and there being no longer any object in assuming madness, he becomes perfectly sane, and recognizes the necessity of action.

Here I have made a new departure from the ordinary acting version of the play. To the soliloquy beginning with the line, "'Tis now the very witching time of night," I have added that other soliloquy of the fourth act,

which is, perhaps, the greatest of all of them, and to which, since Shakespeare's days, the walls of the theatre have never or rarely resounded. Those noble lines, "How all occasions do inform against me, and spur my dull revenge" (vividly illustrative as they are of the workings of Hamlet's inner nature, and, therefore, of the highest importance to the play), have been banished hitherto from the stage, because they are imprisoned in that episode of the journey to England which cannot be presented from simple lack of time. From that prison I have freed them, by applying them here at a moment of one of Hamlet's self-communings, to which they seem equally applicable. And if the transposition be held to be daring, it may claim the excuse of having been done in the cause of preserving a literary gem. The concluding words of this speech are: "O from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth." And to these, in my version, the speech beginning, "'Tis now the very witching time of night," are appropriately joined.

Hamlet now starts on his mission to his mother. Again his gentle nature asserts itself, and he kneels down to pray to the Vir-

gin: "Let not ever the soul of Nero enter this firm bosom—let me be cruel, not unnatural—I will speak daggers to her, but use none." On his way through one of the winding corridors of the castle, he stumbles upon the very subject of his intended revenge. He finds the King praying. The opportunity so long looked for has come "pat" at last. The soliloquy in which Hamlet's purpose once more dissipates itself has been described by Johnson as "too horrible to be read or to be uttered." Hamlet finds relief in those terrible words. The scene is important, because it so clearly reveals that tenderer side of Hamlet's nature, which makes him seek for any excuse which may postpone the shedding of blood. Once more action is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of philosophy.

In the scene with the Queen, which follows immediately upon this, Hamlet upbraids his mother in such passionate words as to lead her to think he is bent on murdering her. A voice is heard behind the arras, Hamlet rushes up, wildly thrusting his sword through the opening—a dead body falls through the arras. "Is it the King?" asks Hamlet; then, lifting the arras, he finds Polonius is the victim of his

momentary violence. He once more turns to his mother, and in words of passion, in which there is no madness, he contrasts the living husband with the dead. "Look here upon this picture and on this—the counterfeit presentment of two brothers." There has always been much hot discussion as to whether the pictures should be really shown, or whether they should only be in the mind's eye. Personally I incline to think that Shakespeare's intention was that miniatures should be used. That they were very generally worn (or rather supposed to be worn) at the period of the play is beyond question, for Hamlet says to Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern in an earlier scene, speaking of his uncle, "For those that would make mouths at him while my father lived will give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats a piece for his picture in little." But after all, it is not material to the great issues of the play whether the miniatures or pictures are pointed at, or whether their mention is only symbolical. In a crescendo of passion, Hamlet pours forth reproaches to the Queen, and in the height of his frenzy, the Ghost of his dead father enters to whet his son's almost blunted purpose. The sight of the Ghost is not vouchsafed to the

mother, who cries, "Alas, he is mad." In the scenes in Act I. the Ghost has appeared to the soldiers as well as to the practical Horatio, and it cannot, therefore, be maintained that the apparition is the creation of Hamlet's disordered brain. Indeed, after the Ghost's disappearance, Hamlet takes pains to undeceive his mother as to his madness, telling her that he is not really mad, but only mad in craft, and enjoins her not to let the King suspect his sanity. After counselling the Queen to lead a purer life "with the other half," Hamlet expresses his sorrow at having caused the death of Polonius, and bids his mother good-night, leading her sternly to the *prie-dieu*, at which she kneels sobbing. Hamlet's words are, "I must be cruel only to be kind. Thus bad begins"; then fatefully he adds: "But worse remains behind." And so ends the third act of our acting version.

As Hamlet does not appear in the flesh during Act IV., I need not refer to the events which take place in its course; suffice it to say, that there is nothing which could lead us to a different estimate of Hamlet's mental condition. In Act V. we find the two gravediggers digging Ophelia's grave. The churchyard is,



as a rule, made a somewhat gloomy scene, and here, I may mention, that I have thought fit to change the setting. It is a May-day evening, the sweet-briar is in bloom, the birds are singing, the sheep-bells are tinkling — nature is rejoicing while man is mourning. It has seemed to me that rather than detracting from the tragic events which pass before our eyes, an added emphasis is thus supplied by the heartlessness of nature. Hamlet appears with Horatio to hear the gravedigger singing a comic song while he is digging the grave; and this gives him an opportunity of indulging his passion for idle philosophy. On seeing the skull of Yorick he again gives full rein to his imagination, as he pictures to himself how —

Imperious Cæsar, dead and turned to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

But his musings are cut short by the approach of the mourning procession. Hamlet is overcome with grief on learning of the fair Ophelia's death. "Forty thousand brothers," he cries, "could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum." That Hamlet deeply loved Ophelia is thus shown. And in order to emphasize this side of Hamlet's nature, I have in-

roduced the following effect at the conclusion of the Graveyard scene. Hamlet has departed, followed by the King, Queen, Laertes, and the courtiers. In the church close by, the organ peals out a funeral march. Night is falling, the birds are at rest, Ophelia's grave is deserted. But through the shadows, Hamlet's returning form is seen gathering wild flowers. He is alone with his dead love, and on her he strews the flowers as he falls by her grave in a paroxysm of grief. And so the curtain falls on another scene.

The last scene of all which ends this strange eventful history, takes place in the court-yard of the Palace. Hamlet feels the hand of fate upon him — but to him death has lost its terror. “If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now — if it be not now, yet it will come,” are his words to Horatio. The most determined quibbler could hardly find symptoms of madness in Hamlet's latest utterances. With exquisite grace Hamlet makes his *amende* and his salute to Laertes, and proceeds to play with the foils. Here, in passing, I may touch upon a small point which nevertheless has been much debated — I mean the line “Our son is fat and scant of breath.”

I take it that Shakespeare wrote "Our son is *faint* and scant of breath," and so it is spoken on our stage. Mark how this reading is borne out by the dialogue as illustrated by stage-management:—

Hamlet and Laertes have been fencing violently. The King asks that the cup be given him. Hamlet refuses the drink, resumes the fencing, and, for the second time, hits Laertes; somewhat exhausted with the fight, he rests on Horatio's arm. The King cries, "Our son shall win"; the Queen —

He's faint, and scant of breath —

Here, Hamlet, take my napkin; rub thy brows.

The drink is again sent to Hamlet. The Queen goes to him and says "Come, let us wipe thy face." While Hamlet is recovering, the King and Laertes are afforded an opportunity of their treacherous asides. Now, I maintain that this is a perfectly sane interpretation of the scene. There is nothing to indicate that Hamlet was a fat man, and I believe that the word was originally written "faint," but that the "i" and the "n" were somehow dropped out. Moreover, the business of the scene is exactly that which would

apply to a man who was faint — you would give him drink and you would wipe his brows. This, it seems to me, does not apply so well to a man who was suffering from obesity. But let us have done with quibble, for Hamlet is dying, struck by the poisoned sword of treachery; fate enters his soul, and, at last, with the instrument of his own destruction, he kills the King. His last moments are softened by a sweet sanity. To Horatio his dying words are addressed.

If thou did'st ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story.

Kissing the forehead of his friend, and with his father's picture on his heart, Hamlet says, with his last breath,

The rest is silence.

Here as a rule the curtain falls in silence, but I prefer to preserve Horatio's beautiful words,

Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night, sweet Prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

And so, with the faint echo of heavenly music ringing in our ears, the record of Hamlet's storm-toss'd life closes. The worst that can have been done has been done — the carnal, bloody and unnatural acts; the accidental judgments; the deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause; the purposes mistook fall'n on the inventor's head — all these conspiring agents of an unshunnable destiny have worked their remorseless fill, and the end is serenity and rest at last. Hamlet sleeps, for good or ill — for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. It is this refrain which rings once more in our ears as we take leave of the sweet Prince. It is this philosophic doubt which hangs like a miasma over our modern thought, and Hamlet is the most modern of men — he is not only of to-day, he is of the day after to-morrow. The sickness which afflicted Hamlet was what the Germans call "gruebeln" — a kind of intellectual burrowing which has laid many a noble nature low. Thought is the great destroyer. Our fondest teachings crumble in its presence like castles in the air — right and wrong become blurred and confused when we reflect that there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

It has been my aim by the practical assistance of an actor's prompt book to show that Hamlet's supposed madness was a feigned madness, and that many of the difficulties of this Shakespearian masterpiece are really little else than the outcome of a super-acute but unpractical comment. If to the pure all things are pure, to the plain-seekers many things often appear plain. And if some of the alleged obscurities of Hamlet have been dispelled by an actor-manager's prompt copy, the reason may lie in the fact that Shakespeare was an actor-manager himself. The fact must never be lost sight of that his plays were primarily designed for the stage, and not for the library; that though the greatest of poets, he was an experienced actor as well; and that the prompt copies of his own plays must have been originally filled with stage business in the highest degree illustrative of the text, and the greater part of which has been lost for ever.

I may be allowed, perhaps, to add that I have done my best to make myself acquainted with the works of the literary commentators. I have admired — as who has not? — Goethe's exquisite comparison of Hamlet's nature to an oak-tree planted in a costly vase intended only for love flowers, and Lessing's fine description

of the majesty of buried Denmark as "A Ghost before whom the hair stands on end whether it cover a believing or an unbelieving brow"; and Hazlitt's exquisite commentary on the real Hamlet who is in each one of us who has "lost his mirth, though why he know not"; and Klein's exquisite ridicule of the German fad-dists; and Victor Hugo's subtle illustrative quotation from the Prometheus "That to pretend madness is the secret of the wise." But I still have the temerity to hope that I have been able to throw an added light on Hamlet's difficulties by a more practical medium than metaphysical speculation. I take my stand on the prompt copy. If by the simple application of an actor's experience, I have been able to make Hamlet's attitude in this great play more plain than it has hitherto appeared to many, my labours in what I feel to be a good and a sane cause will be more than amply rewarded.

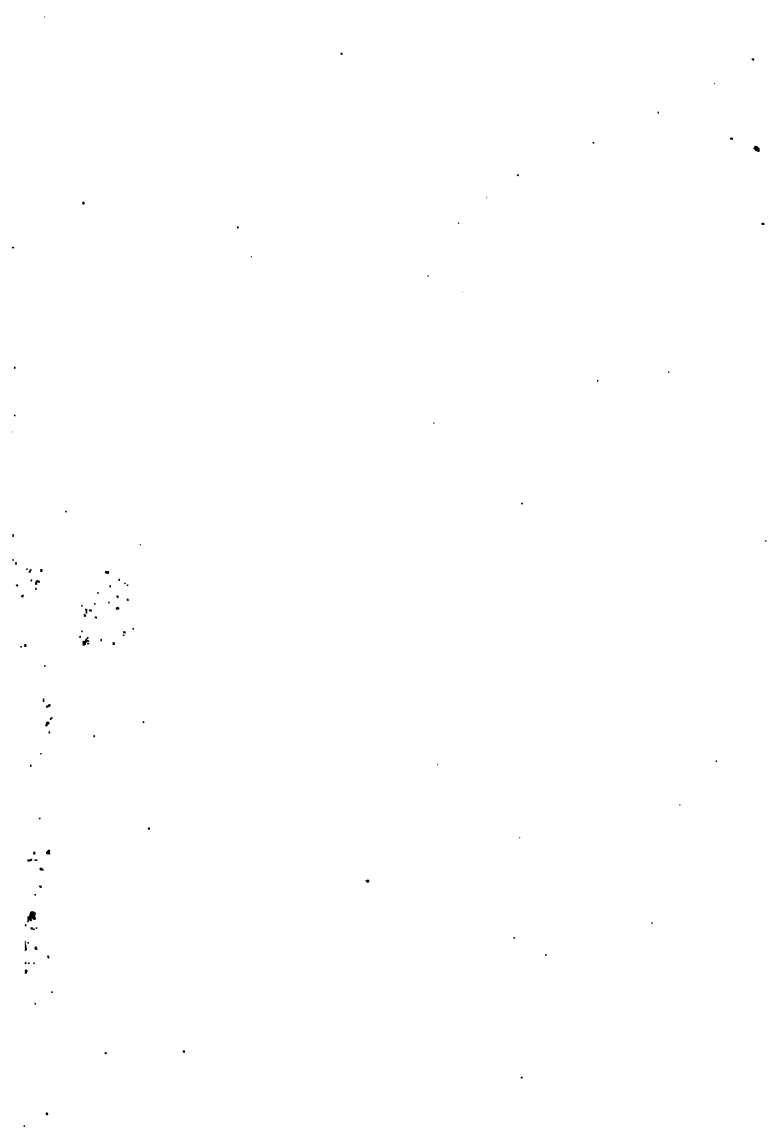
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